

# The Builder.

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**S**OME of our readers express an anxious desire to know what has really been done by the Board of Health towards the prevention of intramural interments, and the provision of proper places of burial for the metropolis. A reference to the Minutes of the Board will enable us in some degree to answer the inquiry. The answer will not be satisfactory, and the Board, we have no doubt, feel this as acutely as any public complainant can.

Immediately after the Royal Assent had been given to the Metropolitan Interment Act, we find the Board (August, 1850) in treaty for the purchase of the Abbey Wood Estate, near Erith, and considering the best mode of forming cemeteries, plans for reception houses, and designs for appropriate art-decorations. They very soon, too, came to the determination to buy up all the existing cemeteries, and valuations were made and negotiations carried on with this end in view. The idea that their object in purchasing was to make use of the cemeteries as general burial-grounds for the metropolis has excited, we may here stop to mention, some alarms. One correspondent of a morning contemporary, writing with reference to the West London Cemetery, says,—

"The conversion of the Brompton Cemetery, which lies in the centre of Kensington, Brompton, Chelsea, and Parsons-green—one of the most crowded suburbs of London, and in a locality which is being rapidly built upon, will justly entitle the Board of Health to be called the Board of Death; and it is to be hoped that the inhabitants of those four suburbs will at once adopt measures with the Lords of the Treasury, to avert the stonification of making Brompton Cemetery a common grave-pit for a large portion of the annual mortality of the metropolis. The recent Extramural Burial Act was passed for the express purpose of getting rid of interring the dead either in or near London; and with the convenience of cheap and rapid conveyance, a distant Metropolitan Cemetery, or rather Necropolis, upon a grand and comprehensive scale, is a thing equally called for by health, by economy, and by decency.

Public attention being no longer engrossed by the Great Exhibition of the Industry of all Nations, so important a matter as a befitting Last Home for the reception of the dead, of all ranks, classes, and denominations of the two and a half million inhabitants of this vast metropolis, ought to engage the best regards of Her Majesty's responsible advisers; and certainly the Lords of the Treasury will deserve the severest public censure if they sanction so intolerable a nuisance as Brompton Cemetery must become, if some 15,000, 20,000, or 25,000 corpses are deposited yearly within its walls, enclosing as it does only 38 acres of ground."

It will be seen, however, from the following extract from the Minutes, that this was not by any means the intention of the Board. They say that,—

"Considering the general nature of the sub-soil and sites of these cemeteries, the extent to which they are at present occupied, the unsuitable nature of the edifices erected in them for the celebration of religious rites, the inferior character of the surface and monumental decoration, the great expense which would be incurred in adapting them to the purposes of a proper system of sepulture, the existing cemeteries are not calculated to realize the intentions of the Legislature and of the public with

respect to the necessity of providing suitable places for metropolitan interment; the Board therefore considered that these cemeteries can only be recommended for purchase in order to be temporarily used during the interval which must elapse before suitable provision can be made by the Board for carrying fully out the intentions of the Metropolitan Interment Act, and that then they should be permanently closed."

Elsewhere they say,—

"Of the eight existing cemeteries, five consist almost entirely of a stiff retentive clay soil, quite unsuitable for the purposes of interment. This soil could only be rendered fit for interment at a cost between two and three times as great as would be requisite for the purchase of new sites where the soil is unobjectionable. Of the remaining three cemeteries, the soil of one is so porous and dry as necessarily to impede decay; of another, the soil could not be used without an expensive process of drainage, and out of the whole eight there is only one the soil of which can be considered in its present state as fit for interment.

In all the cemeteries the chapel accommodation is wholly inadequate for the suitable performance of religious rites, while six out of the eight must be considered as urban rather than suburban in position, inasmuch as they are either in immediate contiguity to densely peopled neighbourhoods, or the population close to their walls is increasing so rapidly that in a few years the vicinity will be too populous to admit of the continuance of interments in them with safety to the public health. The two remaining cemeteries, although at a greater distance from London, have, nevertheless, an increasing population close to them."

For these reasons the Board arrived at the conclusion that none of the present cemeteries could ever be used permanently as places of burial, and they came to the opinion that the whole of the cemeteries should be purchased at once.\*

The permission of the Lords of the Treasury being sought to open a treaty for the purchase of all these cemeteries, a long correspondence ensued, in the progress of which the Lords of the Treasury advised that negotiations should be opened with one or two companies only. To this course the Board objected, maintaining, amongst other grounds, that if they were to compete with the cemetery companies, as the latter are free from all sanitary regulations, the Board would compete at a disadvantage, and that some of the worst existing evils would be maintained. "Moreover, if the Board were at once to adopt their lordships' suggestion, and to purchase ground with a view to carry out the requirements of the Act, independently of the cemeteries still remaining open, the Board could not immediately take steps for the practice of interment in them: a considerable time would necessarily elapse in negotiating for the purchase of the ground, and in preparing it when obtained in a becoming manner for

national sepulture. In the meantime the necessities of the public health may require the intramural burial grounds to be closed: the burials which now take place in the metropolitan graveyards would then necessarily take place in the cemeteries, and while the additional profits which would thus accrue to the cemeteries would be urged as an additional claim for compensation, the public would be placed entirely at the mercy of the companies, both as to their charges and their mode of burial, while many persons who feel a strong objection to burial in cemeteries conducted by trading companies, would by this mode of proceeding be compelled to have recourse to them."

They thought that the saving which might be effected in burials by carrying out the prescribed scheme of sepulture, as a whole, would be adequate to meet the required expenditure, and to allow of a considerable reduction of existing charges. Ultimately the Treasury gave a general authority to proceed with the purchase of the cemeteries, under the powers of the Metropolitan Interment Act, recommending that the Board should endeavour, in the first instance, to acquire one or two of the cemeteries which might be most readily purchased. Arrangements were accordingly made for effecting, by arbitration, the purchase of the West London Cemetery, at Brompton, and the Nunhead Cemetery. To this we will return, but confine ourselves for a few moments to the Minutes.

The extent of the Abbey Wood Estate is 433 acres, and the price asked was 40,000*l.*, or about 93*l.* per acre. This the Board were prepared to give, and sought the sanction of the Treasury, stating their belief that they would have no difficulty in borrowing the requisite funds, at 4½ per cent., from the Guardian Assurance Office. The Treasury assented to the purchase and the loan, but the negotiation for the latter was brought to an abrupt termination, owing to the prevalence of a legal objection on the part of the law advisers of the company to the securities provided for lenders under the Metropolitan Interment Act. The objection was this:—It was said, that whilst the Public Health Act, sect. 4, and the Metropolitan Interment Act, sect. 4, provide that the corporate character of the Board of Health shall be continued only "for five years next after the passing of the Public Health Act, 1848, and thenceforth until the end of the then next session of Parliament," no provision has been made as to the mode in which the engagements and liabilities of the Board are to be met after the expiration of that period.

There was a second objection, to this effect:—"That, as the law now stands, there is nothing to prevent the formation of new cemetery companies beyond the metropolitan district to compete with the Board, and that as such companies would be free from the heavy charges imposed on the Board for compensations, &c., the Board would be unable to support the competition. This objection goes to the root of all the calculations upon which the Board rest their estimates of a revenue, and can be removed by nothing else but relieving the Board from the possibility of competition."

An endeavour to obtain the money from the Exchange Assurance Company failed on the same grounds: the Treasury declined to make advances; and directed the Board to put an

\* These were the reasons which influenced this determination:—

1. In order that each cemetery, according to its situation and condition, may be made immediately available for the gradual introduction of the change in the practice of interment, the temporary use of the present cemeteries, pending the preparation of new and permanent ones, being the best preparation for the general use of others which it is hoped will be better adapted for the purpose of sepulture:

2. In order that the convenience of the populations in the immediate neighbourhood of the several cemeteries may be consulted, so that an opportunity may be afforded for the freest selection of any one of them. It will, it is apprehended, be found extremely difficult to deal with any one separately from the whole, because people will make their own choice of the place of burial, with which choice it will be as impracticable as undesirable to interfere. Many of the residents in the east will desire interment in the west. But if a western cemetery alone were opened, or if any one district alone were closed, without preparation for interment in other districts, it may be expected that the undertakers for the district within which the cemetery was closed would make effort to divert the burials from the new cemetery, and crowd them into the churchyards of the districts remaining unclosed. In this manner the existing evils of overcrowding in the other districts would be increased."